

IN THE TRENCHES.



WAITING FOR THE WELSH DISESTABLISHMENT ATTACK.

LA MAUVAISE RICHE.

By ALGERNON BLACKWOOD.

If seeing is believing, the story, of course, is justified, and stands foursquare as a fact, for certainly both my cousin and myself saw the thing as clearly as we saw the village church and the wooded mountains beyond, which were its background. There may, however, be other explanations, and my cousin, who is something of a psychologist, availed himself volubly of the occasion to ride his pet hobby. He easily riddled the saying that seeing is believing, while I listened as patiently as possible. Although no psychologist myself, I knew that the phrase was as inadequate as most other generalisations. Indeed, there is no commoner act of magic in daily life than that of sight, by which the mind projects into the air an image, translated objectively from a sensation in the brain caused by light irritating the optic nerve. "The picture on the retina, upside down, anyhow," he kept telling me afterwards, "is not the object itself that throws off the light-rays, is it? You never see the actual object, do you? You're merely playing with an image, eh? It's pure imagination, don't you see? It's simple magic, the magic that everybody denies."

Yet, somehow, nothing he could offer by way of explanation satisfied me. The question form of his sentences, moreover, irritated. I rather clung to "seeing is believing," and I think in his heart he did the same, for all his cloud of words. It was evening, and the summer dusk was falling, as we tramped in silence up the hill towards the village where my cousin, with his wife and children, occupy the upper part of an old ch  let. We had been climbing Jura cliffs all day; it had been arduous, exciting work, and we both were tired out. Conversation had long since ceased; our legs moved mechanically, and we both devoutly wished we were at home. "Ah, there's the cemetery at last," he sighed, as the landmark near the village came into view. "Thank goodness!" and I was too weary even to make the obvious comment. The relief of lying down seemed in his mind. With a grunt by way of reply I glanced curiously at the rough stone-wall surrounding the ugly patch cut squarely from the vineyards, and at the formal pines and larches that stood, plumelike, among the last resting-place, "as he added, as we passed the painted iron-gate, "and a good thing too!" There was relief in his tone, but a moment later there was vivid annoyance. "Izzie," he cried, stopping short, "what are you doing again in there? You know your mother forbade you to go any more. What a naughty, disobedient child you are!"

He and he called to his fourteen-year-old child to come out. She came at once, but listlessly, and not one whit afraid. He scolded her a little. "I was only putting flowers on the grave," she said. Her face wore a puzzled, scared expression, and the eyes were very bright—she had wonderful brown eyes—but it was not her father's chiding that caused the look. She took our arms with affectionate possession, as her way was, and we all three laboured up the hill together. No more was said; her father was too tired to find further fault. "Please don't tell mother, Daddy, will you?" she whispered, as we reached the ch  let and went in: "I promise faithfully not to go again." He said nothing, but I saw him give her a kiss, and I gave her one myself. The feeling was strong in me that she was frightened and needed protection. I put my arm tightly round her, giving her a good warm hug. The pleading, helpless look she gave me in return I shall not soon forget.

The memory of "old m  re Corbillard" no one cared to keep alive—the wealthy peasant who had died a week ago. Known as "la mauvaise riche," because of her miserly habits, she was also credited with stealing her neighbours' cats for the purpose of devouring them—"lapin de montagne," as the natives termed the horrid dish. Her face was sinister—steel-grey eyes, hooked nose, and prominent teeth—and had the village soul been more imaginative or superstitious, she would certainly have been called a witch. As it was, she merely passed for "m  chante" and distinctly "toqu  e." Held in general disfavour, she was avoided and disliked, and she repaid the hatred well, thanks to her money. She lived in utter solitude, the one companion, oddly enough, to whom admittance was never denied, being—Izzie. "Oddly enough," because, while the old woman was half-imbecile, maliciously imbecile, the child, on her side, to put it kindly, was unusually backward for her age, if not mentally deficient. But Izzie's deficiency was of mild and gentle quality—a sweet child, if ever there was one. And the parents, while barely tolerating the strange acquaintance, never knew how frequently the visits were. They always meant to stop the friendship, yet had never done so. Izzie, true solitary, kept to herself too much. She loved the old woman's stories. They hesitated to say the final No. Thus, at first, they let her go to put fresh flowers, which she picked herself, upon the grave, until, feeling that her too constant journeys there were morbid, the ultimatum had gone forth that they must stop. "It's queer that you should care to go so often," said her father. "It's not right," added her mother, the parents exchanging a look that meant they scented some unholy influence at work. "But I promised to do it every day," said Izzie frankly. Then further explanations elicited the unwelcome addition: "She said she would come and fetch me if I didn't!"—and the influence of the old woman seemed defined. "Ha, ha!" said mother's eyes to father: "so the old wretch frightened her apparently into the promise," and they congratulated themselves that the mischief had been stopped in time.

The incident was slight enough. The imagination of the backward child, perhaps a little morbidly inclined owing to her love of solitude, had been unduly stimulated. It had been gently, wisely corrected, and the matter was at an end. Yet, somehow, for me, it lingered in my memory, as though something very vital lay at the core of it.

There followed forty-eight hours of soaking rain that kept us all indoors, and after it a day of cloudless sunshine that made everybody happy. We romped and played with the children, basked in the delicious heat, and were generally full of active mischief. Mother, mending stockings and trying to write letters, had a sorry time of it. But joy and forgiveness ruled the day, and one was ashamed to feel vexation at anything with such a 'sun in the heavens. Only Izzie, I noticed, kept apart; she was listless and indifferent, joining in no games; her thin, pale face, in contrast to the strange brilliance of her eyes, was evidence to me of some force busily at work within. But she kept it fairly well concealed; it seemed natural for her to moon about alone; I think no one else noticed that her behaviour was more marked than usual. With the cunning of the slow-witted she avoided me in particular, guessing that I was ready to make advances. She divined that I understood. Hiding my purpose as well as possible, I kept her closely under observation, and after supper, when she strolled off alone down the road between the vineyards, I called to Daddy to come and have a pipe. We followed her. The moment we caught her up she turned and took her place as usual, an arm to each. How tall she seemed; she almost topped her father. She kept silence, merely walking in step with us, and holding us rather close I thought, as though glad of our presence though she had started off alone. At first Daddy made efforts to draw her into conversation—efforts that failed utterly. For my part, I let her be, content to keep her arm firmly in my own, for there was very strong in me the feeling that I must protect and watch, guarding her from something that she feared yet was unable to resist. We talked across her, I guiding the conversation towards fun, and she was so tall that we had to stoop and lean forward to see each other's faces.

Hot sun had dried the road up, and the evening was still and peaceful. We paced slowly to and fro, turning always at the village fountain, and again at the crest of the hill where the descent went steeply towards the cemetery. And here, at each turning, Izzie lingered a moment and looked down the hill. I felt perceptibly the dragging on my arm. Once, at the fountain, I made to follow the road through the village. "No," said the child, with decision I disliked intensely, "let's go back again," and we obeyed meekly. "Little tyrant," said her unobtrusive father.

The mountains rose in a wall of purple shadow, their ridges outlined against a fading sky of gold and crimson. Thin columns of peat smoke traced their scaffolding across it faintly, then melted out. From time to time a group of labourers from the vineyards passed us, singing the Dalcroze songs, taking their hats off, and saying "Bon soir, bonne nuit." We knew them all. Izzie watched them go—with almost feverish interest. I got the queer impression she was waiting till the last group had gone home. She certainly was waiting for something; there was a covert expectancy in her manner that stirred my former uneasiness. And this uneasiness grew stronger every minute. I could hardly listen to my cousin's desultory talk. At last I brought things suddenly to a head, for it was more than my nerves could stand. Abruptly I stood still. The other two, linked arm-in-arm, stood with me.

"Daddy," I said sharply, "let's go in," and was going to add peremptorily, "take Izzie with you," when the words died away on my lips and the tongue in my mouth went dry. My blood seemed turned to ice. For a second I stood in rigid paralysis. For the figure between us, she whose arms were linked in ours, was not Izzie, but another. A gaunt, lean face peered close into my own through the dusk as I stooped to see my cousin, and the eyes were of cold steel grey instead of brown. The skin was lined and furrowed and projecting teeth of an aged woman gleamed faintly below the great hooked nose. It was m  re Corbillard who stood between us, hanging her withered hands upon our arms, her sinister face so close that her straggling thin grey hair even touched our shoulders.

The dreadful sight was as vividly defined as the white face of my cousin which I saw the same instant just beyond; and by his ghastly pallor, and the water in his eyes, I knew that he had seen her too. His lips were parted, his right hand was raised and clenched. I thought he was going to strike, but instead, wrenching himself violently free, he sprang to one side with an expression of horror that was more a cry than actual words. There was a shriek; whose I dare not say; it may have been my own for all my scattered senses can remember. To this day what I recall was the sensation of death upon my arm, and the glare of those steely eyes that peered triumphantly into my own—then a momentary darkness.

All happened in less than a second. The figure had broken loose from between us, and was racing down the road like a flying shadow—towards the cemetery. Yet the figure we watched an instant before starting in frantic pursuit was unmistakably—Izzie.

To my cousin belongs the reward of prompt action and recapture. He simply flew. And he caught the child long before she reached the forbidden gates. Weeping, white and frightened, we half carried her indoors, and explained to her a shriek; that she had been taken suddenly ill, a *crise de nerfs*, as Daddy, with presence of mind, described it. It was not the first time; Izzie had been too often hysterical to cause undue anxiety. Mother will never know the truth unless she reads this story, which is unlikely, since her mending and darning leave her little leisure for newspapers. My cousin and myself have discussed the thing ad nauseam, and as I have indicated, he explained it in a variety of ways. But neither of us knew what Izzie thought or felt. We, of course, dared not ask her, and the child has never volunteered a word. That she was severely frightened only is clear. "She never passes the cemetery alone now, and the name of old m  re Corbillard has not passed her lips a single time. My cousin's discovery of the horror, however, coincided with my own. Comparing notes proved that. He had been aware of no uneasy sensations previously, as I had been. Telepathy, therefore, was the clue he finally decided on. "It covers more ground than the word 'possession,' and has besides," as he said, "a sort of scientific sound."

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